DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 335 CG 018 915

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TITLE Confidentiality Expectations and Preferences of College Students.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Boston, MA, March 21-24, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Confidentiality; *Counselor Client Relationship; *Counselor Role; *Disclosure; *Expectation; Higher Education; *Psychotherapy

ABSTRACT

Confidentiality in psychotherapy has long been assumed. Recently, this confidentiality has been threatened by computer filing systems, the courts, and third party payers of client expenses. This study investigates client expectations of confidentiality and information subject to disclosure. Subjects (N=185) were undergraduate students who completed questionnaires describing 10 clinical problems and 8 potential disclosure situations. Subjects rated how much information they would expect to be divulged and how much information they would prefer to be released. The results indicated a three-way interaction between clinical problems, potential recipients of information, and expectations about release of client information. Subjects always preferred that less information be divulged than they expected to occur. Subjects expected information to be divulged. Since previous research has shown that clients do not disclose as much when they do not expect their communication to be confidential, psychotherapists should discuss the limits of confidentiality with their clients. (ABL)

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CONFIDENTIALITY EXPECTATIONS AND PREFERENCES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Presented to Eastern Psychological Association, Boston, Massachusetts, March, 1985.

Confidentiality has long been thought of as a cornerstone of psychotherapy. The assumption is that people will be reluctant to seek help without a guarantee of confidentiality.

Recently, the absolute privacy of the client has been threatened by external forces such as computer filing systems, the courts, and third party payers of client expenses. These forces threaten the confidentiality of not only the information gathered by psychologists, but even the paperwork administered by secretaries and clerks. Many psychologists have conceded that confidentiality should not be absolute. For example, some have argued that the psychotherapist may have an ethical or legal duty to disclose information about a client under certain circumstances such as when the client is an imminent threat to a third person or to self. Unfortunately, very little is known about the preferences of clients in the matter.

Research on confidentiality of Client Communications

Relevant research has focused upon mental health professionals' attitudes toward confidentiality, on the effect of confidentiality assurances on interviewee behavior and the therapeutic relationship, and on confidentiality expectations of college students.

A survey of mental health professionals by Jagim, Wittman, and Noll (1978) found that the responding professionals were unified in their agreement that they have an ethical obligation to confidentiality. In addition,

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confidentiality was seen as an important component in maintaining a positive therapeutic relationship. Although over half of the respondents indicated that they would break confidentiality under certain circumstances, a small group of professionals maintained an absolute position on confidentiality. Wise (1978) found that 70 percent of psychologists believed that confidentiality could be justifiably breached in some circumstances. In fact, about 50 percent of the respondents reported warning potential victims prior to the famous Tarasoff case. Only 11 percent reported always discussing their policies on confidentiality with the client, but the majority of psychologists believed that their clients assume absolute confidentiality.

The threat of a breach of confidentiality reportedly has a marked effect upon the amount that a client will disclose and upon the therapeutic relationship. Wise (1978) reported that 25 percent of respondents actually observed client reluctance to discuss their violent tendencies when they were informed of the possibility of exceptions to absolute confidentiality. In an analogue study of undergraduates, Woods and McNamara (1980) found that individuals receiving the promise of confidentiality were more open in their disclosures than those given nonconfidentiality instructions. Merluzzi and Brischetto (1982) found that in an analogue situation, psychologists who breached confidentiality in cases involving highly serious problems were preceived as less trustworthy. With moderately serious problems subjects

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did not foresee any serious consequences if the information was released. Apparently, subjects believed that confidentiality was more important with problems of a very serious nature, although in those situations psychologists may be feel obligated to breach confidentiality.

In an earlier study, Anderson and Sherr (1969) found that undergraduate students discriminate among types of information they would allow to be released dependent upon the recipient of the information. In general, subjects indicated some willingness to release information to administrators, parents, employers, and to the student. Subjects were more reluctant to release information to professors, welfare agencies, other counselors, and law enforcement agencies. The type of information to be released was also significant. Subjects expressed greater willingness to make known aptitude test results, vocational interest inventory results, and favorable information than personality test results, personal problem information, and unfavorable information. While many psychologists believe that their clients assume absolute confidentiality, the above data suggest that clients may have a different expectation.

Present Study

The current study investigated several issues. First, the difference between client expectations (what the client expects will happen regardless of their wishes) and client preference was examined. Second, the issue of the content of client information subject to disclosure was explored.

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Third, the effect of varying the potential recipient of the client information was investigated.

Method

A 160-item survey was constructed. The questionaire is divided into ten clinical problems and eight potential confidentiality disclosure situations (see Table 1). The clinical problems range from mild (e.g., academic and vocational issues) to extremely serious (e.g., suicide). The confidentiality disclosure situations describe to whom and under what circumstances information about the problem may be released (e.g., release of information to curious parents or insurance company).

For each confidentiality situation and clinical problem, the subjects were asked how much information they would expect to be divulged and how much information they would prefer to be released (see Table 2 for instructions and Table 3 for a sample of the first page of the survey).

The instructions asked the subjects to imagine having discussed each problem with a counselor for at least six sessions. The responses were recorded on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "very little information" to 6 = "all available information." The final form of the survey was administered to 185 undergraduate psychology students at a midsized eastern university. Of this total, 92 of the subjects were male and 93 were female.

Results

A subset of 31 subjects were retested after three to

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four weeks to determine reliability. Correlations were found for each of the 160 survey questions and for each of the 31 subjects. These coefficients were converted to z scores in order to normalize them. The z scores were then averaged. The mean z score for questions was .58, while the mean z score for subjects was .82.

The means for total expectation and preference responses were 3.61 and 3.20 respectively, $t(184) = 9.50$, $p < .001$. Subjects routinely preferred that less information be released than they expected would be. Means and standard deviation scores for expectation and preference for each clinical problem are found in Table 4, and for expectation and preference for each confidentiality situation in Table 5

In order to test the significance of the effects of clinical problem, confidentiality situation, and expectation of subjects on the amount of information which might be released, an 3-way analysis of variance was computed. All main effects and interactions were significant beyond the .001 level. One helpful way to visualize some of the significant differences is presented in Tables 6 through 9. Table 6 presents differences between problems for expectations while Table 7 presents differences between problems for preferences. Tables 8 and 9 present similar data for differences between disclosure situations.

The tables can be read as follows. Look at Table 6 which compares the various clinical problems by expectation. The capitol letters "A" through "J" refer to clinical

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problems as defined at the bottom of the page. For example, the letter "B" refers to the problem of incest. while the letter "J" refers to career and educational concerns. Beneath each letter is the respective mean averaged across potential recipients. Thus, it can be seen that subjects expected more information to be released about career and educational concerns than about incest. The difference between these scores can be seen by moving downward along the lines under each mean score until the lines intersect. In this example the difference between means "B" and "J"is 1.08. Differences between all other pairs of means can be assessed in the same manner. Differences which are significant are identified by an asterisk.

As can be seen on Table 6, subjects expected significantly less information to be divulged about problems of incest, sexual concerns, problem pregnancy, and potential harm to another person than they expected to be divulged about career and educational concerns. Table 7 presents a similar pattern for subjects' preferences. Subjects preferred that less information be divulged about all problem areas except school pressure than for career and educational concerns. In addition, significant differences were also found between school pressure and potential harm to another, sexual concerns, and incest.

Turning to Table 8 which provides means for the various recipients, it can be seen that subjects expect extensive information to be released to another counselor and to the

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client. They expect the least information to be released to potential employers, to parents, and to the school administration. A few significant differences are noted. Finally, Table 9 presents subjects' preferences for release under the eight situations. Notice that subjects prefer little information to be released to potential employers, to parents, to school administrators, to insurance companies, or in a popular novel. Slightly more information could be released in a journal article, and significantly more could be released to another counselor or to the client himself/herself.

Discussion

These results indicate that there is a three-way interaction between clinical problems, potential recipients of information, and expectations about release of client information. Subjects always preferred that less information be divulged than they expected to actually occur. One could argue from these data that these subjects fully expect that some amount of information will be divulged when it is requested from the therapist. These subjects do not expect absolute confidentiality for client information. Research cited earlier found that clients do not disclose as much in therapy when they do not expect their communications to be kept confidential. It obviously behooves psychotherapists to discuss the boundaries of confidentiality with their clients to remove any misgivings.

Limitations to these data must be noted. Undergraduate

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students may not be representative of the general population or of mental health clients of any age. We do not know how much knowledge an average college student has about counseling or about the implications of releasing client information. It is essential to collect similar information from genuine clients. Such research is underway.

Table 1

Content and Abbreviations of

Clinical Problems and Confidentiality Situations

Abbreviation	Content
	Clinical Problems
A	family relationship concerns
B	incest
C	non-family relationship concerns
D	school pressure
E	drinking problem
F	suicide
G	potential harm to another
H	sexual concerns
I	problem pregnancy
J	career and educational concerns
	Confidentiality Situations
1	release to potential employer
2	release to the client
3	release to parents
4	release to school administration
5	release to insurance company
6	inclusion in a journal article
7	inclusion in a popular novel
8	release to another counselor

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EXPECTATIONS AND PREFERENCES FOR CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION SHARED WITH A COUNSELOR

This is a questionnaire which explores your ideas about the privac or confidentiality of personal information which might be shared with a counselo A counselor is someone who practices psychotherapy. In other words, a counselor helps people with personal problems by talking about these problems and trying to work them out. In order to fill out this questionnaire you will be asked to imagine that you have talked with a counselor about a series of personal problem You will then be asked several questions about how confidential you think such personal information would be, or should be, kept.

More specifically, one purpose of this survey is to find out how much colle students know about the current confidentiality practices of counselors. This is called your expectation of confidentiality. In other words, how private do you think what you tell a counselor would be?

Another purpose of this survey is to find out what college students would like these confidentiality practices to be. This is called your preference for confidentiality. In other words, how private would you like what you tell a counselor to be?

Your expectations and your preferences for confidentiality do not need to be the same. That is, you may prefer that personal information shared with a counselor be kept more confidential than you suspect it really will be. Or, you may actually not be as concerned about confidentiality as your counselor may be. The actual practices of counselors for protecting personal information may or may not match your preferences.

To complete the survey, it will be important for you to pretend that you have been seeing a counselor for at least 6 weeks. First, you will read a description of a problem. You are to pretend that you have discussed this problem with your counselor for at least 6 sessions. Next, you will read a description of a confidentiality dilemma which you are to pretend that your counselor is facing. Finally, you will be asked two questions about this particular problem and confidentiality dilemma: "How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge if you were not asked first?" and "How much information would you allow or prefer your counselor to divulge if you had total control over it?" To divulge information means to share with another person something you have said in a counseling session.

Record your responses on the answer sheet with a #2 pencil. Fill in the circle which corresponds to the amount of information you either expect or prefer a counselor to divulge. Choose the amount of information from the following scale:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
no information		some impersonal facts			all available information	I have no idea

The letters closer to A mean very little information. The letters closer to F mean very much information. The letters in the middle mean some impersonal information. However, since there is no central letter, you must choose a lette which is either closer to A or closer to F. If you have absolutely no idea what to expect or to prefer, fill in the circle corresponding to the letter G.

Record your responses on the answer sheet according to the following scale:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
no information		some impersonal facts			all available information	I have no idea

---

PROBLEM A

You have been having difficulties with a member of your family. You have been working with your counselor at sorting out your feelings about this person.

Imagine that you are now applying for a job. The person who interviews you asks if you have ever received counseling. You tell him or her that you are seeing a counselor right now. Your interviewer calls your counselor.

1. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
2. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine that you are becoming very curious about what your counselor writes in your client record. Finally, you ask your counselor if you can look at your own record.

3. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
4. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine that your parents know that you are seeing a counselor. They are curious about your treatment progress and what you talk about with your counselor. They call your counselor.

5. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
6. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine that you are on academic probation (QPA below 2.00). The school administration (your advisor and dean) need more information to determine whether they will allow you to stay in school. They contact your counselor.

7. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
8. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine that your counselor charges a substantial fee for each counseling session. You cannot afford the payments, but your parent's insurance company agrees to pay most of the bills. However, the insurance company requires proof that you are making progress. They contact your counselor.

9. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
10. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine that your case is rather unique. Your counselor would like to include your case in a journal article that he or she is writing. Your counselor feels that by reading about you, other counselors will learn something about counseling.

11. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
12. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine again that your case is rather unique. Your counselor would like to include your case in a popular novel that he or she is writing. Your counselor feels that your case material will make very interesting reading and will help the novel to be a success.

13. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
14. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

Imagine that you have been working hard in the counseling sessions but you and your counselor do not feel that there has been any progress. Your counselor is not sure of what to do. He or she decides to discuss your case with another counselor to get advice.

15. How much information would you expect your counselor to divulge?
16. How much information would you prefer your counselor to divulge?

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Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations

for Expectation and Preference for Each Confidentiality Situation

Situation (Information Recipient)	Expectation		Preference	
	M	SD	M	SD
1: Potential Employer	2.534	.964	2.051	.784
2: The Client	4.655	1.255	5.311	1.049
3: Parents	2.949	1.169	2.483	1.051
4: School Administration	2.964	.994	2.545	.913
5: Insurance Company	3.021	1.036	2.661	1.027
6: Journal Article	4.117	1.302	3.372	1.366
7: Popular Novel	3.723	1.515	2.684	1.391
8: Another Counselor	4.942	1.125	4.616	1.291

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations

for Expectation and Preference for Each Problem

Problem	Expectation		Preference	
	M	SD	M	SD
A: Family Relationship Concerns	3.819	.842	3.432	.784
B: Incest	3.153	.937	2.583	.743
C: Non-Family Relationship Concerns	3.738	.939	3.357	.908
D: School Pressure	4.014	.953	3.752	1.005
E: Drinking Problem	3.580	.938	3.055	.872
F: Suicide	3.517	.970	3.010	.906
G: Potential Harm To Another	3.337	.901	2.799	.820
H: Sexual Concerns	3.278	.920	2.798	.839
I: Problem Pregnancy	3.342	.955	2.963	.932
J: Career and Educational Concerns	4.330	1.087	4.277	1.146

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Table 6

Neuman-Keuls Tables for Differences

Between Problem Means for Expectation

Problems

	B	H	I	G	F	E	C	A	D	J
Means:	3.25	3.31	3.34	3.35	3.49	3.55	3.76	3.85	4.02	4.33
Differences	.06	.03	.01	.14	.06	.21	.09	.17	.31	
Between	.09	.04	.15	.20	.27	.30	.26	.48		
Means:	.10	.18	.21	.41	.36	.47	.57			
	.24	.24	.42	.50	.53	.78				
	.30	.45	.51	.67	.84					
	.51	.54	.68	.98*						
	.60	.71	.99*							
	.77	1.02*								
	1.08*									

Note. A=family relationship concerns, B=incest, C=non-family relationship concerns, D=school pressure, E=drinking problems, F=suicide, G=potential harm to another, H=sexual concerns, I=problem pregnancy, J=career and educational concerns.

*$p < .01$

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Table 7

Neuman-Keuls Table for Differences Between Problem Means for Preferences

Problems

	B	H	G	I	F	E	C	A	D	J
Means:	2.66	2.81	2.81	2.96	3.01	3.05	3.40	3.48	3.79	4.29
Differences	.15	.00	.15	.05	.04	.35	.08	.31	.50	
Between	.15	.15	.20	.09	.39	.43	.39	.81*		
Means:	.30	.20	.24	.44	.47	.74	.89*			
	.35	.24	.59	.52	.78	1.24*				
	.39	.59	.67	.83	1.28*					
	.74	.67	.98*	1.33*						
	.82	.98*	1.48*							
	1.13*	1.48*								
	1.63*									

Note. A=family relationship concerns, B=incest, C=non-family relationship concerns, D=school pressure, E=drinking problems, F=suicide, G=potential harm to another, H=sexual concerns, I=problem pregnancy, J=career and educational concerns.

*$p < .01$

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Table 8

Neuman-Keuls Table for Differences

Between Situation Means for Expectation

Situations

	1	3	4	5	7	6	2	8
Means:	2.56	2.91	2.92	3.03	3.73	4.23	4.64	4.99
Differences Between Means:	.35	.01	.11	.70	.50	.41	.35	
	.36	.12	.81	1.20	.91	.76		
	.47	.82	1.31	1.61	1.26			
	1.17	1.32	1.72	1.96*				
	1.67	1.73	2.07*					
	2.08*	2.08*						
	2.43*							

Note. 1=release to potential employer, 2=release to the client, 3=release to parents, 4=release to school administration, 5=release to insurance company, 6=inclusion in a journal article, 7=inclusion in a popular novel, 8=release to another counselor.

*$p<.01$

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Table 9

Neuman-Keuls Table for Differences

Between Situation Means for Preference

Situations	1	3	4	5	7	6	8	2
Means:	2.06	2.47	2.53	2.67	2.67	3.44	4.62	5.34
Differences Between Means:	.41	.06	.14	.00	.77	1.18	.72	
	.47	.20	.14	.77	1.95*	1.90*		
	.61	.20	.91	1.95*	2.67*			
	.61	.97	2.09*	2.67*				
	1.38	2.15*	2.81*					
	2.56*	2.87*						
	3.28*							

Note. 1=release to potential employer, 2=release to the client, 3=release to parents, 4=release to school administration, 5=release to insurance company, 6=inclusion in a journal article, 7=inclusion in a popular novel, 8=release to another counselor.

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